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# Farm leaders feel summit a letdown on subsidies

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Prairie farmers should be concerned that no deadline for reducing or eliminating international farm subsidies was set at the Venice summit despite the rhetoric there, an agricultural economist says.

Agreement among the leaders of the seven major Western industrialized nations on the importance of reducing subsidies to farmers "didn't go far enough," said Clay Gilson of the University of Manitoba.

Entering the summit, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was anxious to persuade the other leaders to reduce or eliminate the subsidies. U.S. President Ronald Reagan proposed the payments be done away with by the year 2000.

But the final communiqué from the meeting did not include a deadline or timetable.

"It certainly is a concern," Mr. Gilson said. "Farmers were hoping that the Prime Minister would get a specific timetable. They'll be say-

ing, 'How long will this go on before it's resolved?'"

Costly subsidies to farmers in Europe and the United States have increased production and driven down the price of grain, seriously damaging the Prairie grain industry.

The leaders did head off disaster by generally agreeing on the importance of reducing farm subsidies, Mr. Gilson said. That is encouraging because it shows that Europe recognizes the need to take action.

Prairie farm leaders said they were not surprised that the leaders failed to set a deadline.

"There's going to be a lot of hard times for Canadian farmers before an agreement is reached," said Art Macklin, vice-president of the National Farmers Union. "We can't wait until the year 2000."

However, Mr. Macklin praised Mr. Mulroney for getting agriculture on the agenda. International recognition of the subsidy problem is the first step toward a solution, he said.

Paul Sim, senior policy analyst for the Western Canadian Wheat Growers Association, said the agreement in principle on the need to cut subsidies "has to be viewed in a positive light."

The summit showed there has been significant progress in fighting the problem in the past two years, he said, adding that the Europeans would not have admitted two years ago that it existed. "The lack of a specific time frame is a bit of a concern, but it's not surprising."

Ray Howe, first vice-president of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, said the agreement in principle is "good news for Canadian farmers."

But he warned that progress on cutting the subsidies will be "relatively slow." In the meantime, Ottawa must help Prairie farmers, Mr. Howe said. "Perhaps the year 2000 isn't an unrealistic goal. And a lot of farmers can't survive to the year 2000 without a lot of help."